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The lonely figures of John Betjeman

Loneliness is in some ways an odd quality to claim for John Betjeman. When he died in May 1984, he was a much-loved public figure, a laureate whose famous appearance, both dapper and shabby, was evocative of his age, and denoted the warmth and charm of a recognisable personality. His television appearances had ensured for him recognition by a wide public, and his poems were recognised and enjoyed by those who were not habitual readers of poetry. The success of his *Collected Poems*, published by John Murray in 1958, gained further éclat from being compared with the similar *furore* produced by the publication of Byron, also by John Murray, over a hundred years before. Thirty odd years after his death his work seems of renewed importance. Both the notion of Englishness he so cherished and the landscape and architecture he so vehemently worked to protect has become once again a vital matter, far from merely nostalgic, in renewed agitation about preservation of heritage and a renewed debate about 'Englishness'.

But Betjeman's position was also never an easy one, and still is not. His reputation as a poet had to contend in his lifetime with the critical contempt of the 'hard-line' modernists, for whom he seemed to have substituted an eccentrically successful idiosyncrasy for proper challenge and complaint; and even now his poetry lies open to the charge of being too 'easy', too accessible, to be important. But concurrently with this sense lies a willingness more recently to reinstate Betjeman, to view his apparent artlessness as a serious matter, and to look more curiously and willingly at the workings of his poems, in a spirit more distrustful of easy assumptions about the great and the minor poet, and distinctions between serious and light verse.

Betjeman exemplifies the figure of the popular extrovert who held loneliness complexly and privately within himself. The reserves his loneliness could draw on were more capable of rich poetic expression than any mere introverted privacy could have been (what made him such a brilliant pairing with Larkin on television was the difficult relationship between their difference and their similarity). His celebrity was a more complex matter, and a more alluring one, than anything that can be understood in our modern world as 'celebrity'.

Betjeman's strange straddling of popularity and privacy becomes apparent in poem after poem, as I hope to show, but it also explains Betjeman's accessibility in other, non-poetic areas: his huge importance as a preservationist, his insistence on *looking* at, and encouraging others to look at, buildings, views and urban spaces in their proper human contexts, a habit which was nurtured by his gift for collaboration and friendship. His five years as Assistant Editor of the *Architectural Review* from 1930-1935 helped him form his distinctive, wary relationship with modern architecture. Friends became mentors and collaborators, inspiring, for instance, in the case of Betjeman's association with his Oxford friend Edward James, the striking design of his first collection *Mount Zion*.¹ More enduringly, his friendship with John Piper helped to channel his ideas about art, a subject which appears often in his poetry. Moreover, this partnership, beginning with their collaboration on the Shell Guides from 1936, helped Betjeman to recognise the importance of the angle of view in estimating buildings or landscapes, and to re-evaluate what seemed ugly in relation to the human lived experience. Such a willingness to look again, and to reimagine, was something he shared with Piper, their collaboration a mutually invigorating process, affecting both the art of poetry and painting with an angle of vision which lent to both a complex relationship towards modernism.²

Betjeman's loneliness, then, must be understood as existing, like Samuel Johnson's before him, alongside a vital conviviality, and coalescing

with it, informing the poetic voice at every point. This convivial aspect is easily enough rendered through his early biography. His early life and his later fame are available to us, both through the confessional quality of his own verse, and by the assiduous attention and scholarship of his biographers, the latter detailing a dazzling round of parties and friendships in youth, and, with the advancement of age, the emergence of the famous, frequently televised laureate figure.³

Those biographers have also been at pains to dislodge this picture, and to substitute a Betjeman essentially afraid and uncertain - socially uneasy (and tiresomely toadying to the wealthy and titled), terrified of death, perhaps the last English poet to have been truly afraid of damnation. We do not need, in fact, the researches of biographers to show us such a lonely and terrified Betjeman; within the poetry itself⁴, again and again, this figure emerges: realising with terror the uselessness of human endeavour in 'Goodbye' (p.275), where the former enjoyments of ordinary everyday life - eating, drinking, smoking - are eroded by the knowledge of imminent death; or in the poem 'Five o'clock Shadow' (p.276), where the early evening in the hospital ward denotes the fears which beset the patient at that liminal and melancholy hour when, deserted by doctors, nurses and visitors, he is left to the business of dying; or Mrs Fairclough, realising the gathering shades of night and age in 'Youth and Age on Beaulieu River, Hants' (p.110) as she watches the young girl sculling across the water with an ease that has long deserted the older woman. The word 'lonely' or 'alone' is often a vital cue in the poems' drama, necessary for the full charge of feeling, or the crystallization of mood. But it is not only the poems about death and old age, nor those whose theme is explicitly that of loneliness (as in the poem of that name, p.322), which most clearly convey Betjeman's overriding engagement with this theme. The management of loneliness is crucial to his art: its sudden arrival or realisation, its manoeuvrability within a poem the means of registering the poem's full strength of feeling.

John Betjeman is a poet who makes the most of loneliness, not only its sadness but its alertness. His daughter Candida Lycett Green relates the anecdote of his 'playing dead' as a child in Cornwall, lying inert in the road to see if anyone noticed.⁵ The only child, who was to discover in himself vital gifts of performance with which to protect himself and amuse his contemporaries, was to become a poet attuned to the uses of melancholy and the adjustment of the speakers in his poems to their full extent in expressing it. Betjeman's lonely figures are an important part of the drama and the tonal achievement of his poetry. Just as the uneasy young man was restlessly social, so the poetry relies upon the placing of its vast gallery of watchers and reflectors of loneliness, even in some of his quietest and most intensely personal poems. His best poems navigate loneliness through the use of sometimes keenly alert, sometimes unconscious characters who provide a means to catch this sense of isolation, so that every poem becomes a readjustment, a fresh angle on this feeling, catching the mood at a different point.

To this end, the figures are placed amidst a great variety of settings. Betjeman is a great poet of place, but there is nothing fixed about his loved places. He is not a Housman, identifiable by adherence to a setting from which can then emerge a recognisable voice. The affection is a scattered affection, lovingly drawn for each poem, and crucially working with the consciousness of the depicted figure within it. 'To speak of Mr Betjeman's poems of place as topographical in the narrower sense is a little misleading', said Derek Stanford. 'Most of them are landscapes with figures.'⁶ In this essay I would like to consider the placing of some of these figures, and how they coalesce with Betjeman's 'landscapes', some of which become endowed with a certain watchfulness of loneliness of their own.

Never very far from fear and uncertainty, the chill of loneliness provides a check on the most promising of occasions. 'In the Public Gardens' (p.234) evokes brilliantly the rhythms of the public music so well answering

to the privacy of love within the municipal setting. But it is made to be a merely temporary resplendence by the poem's insistently onward moving 'light verse' register and the time it keeps, the tripping steps of the rhythm by means of which its uneasy lovers are now in love, now out, as they manoeuvre the measure of the dance. Made special and sequestered by their distance from the German language which is made part of that delicate footwork in the first and final stanzas, and from being the only English people present, the lovers are nevertheless contained by the occasion and its accoutrements - lime trees hung with electric lights, the music, the rose the speaker buys for his partner. Against the gold and dark-red of this setting the lovers seem spectral, the rhyming assonance of the adjectives in the third stanza emphasising their frailty, while the last line of the stanza suggests a deep ambiguous inwardness in the speaker, right in the centre of the poem, which does not bode well outside this snatched moment. Tim Hancock has said of this line that it 'seems at one and the same time the most amusing and the most psychologically suggestive' of lines, and that 'the passing reference to fear does invite speculation as to what happened before the resolving night, and what might occur after it.'¹⁷ The following stanza's first two lines, with their emphatic enclosure within the first person pronoun, makes the common, touching tradition of buying a rose for one's beloved a matter of ominous foreboding, especially when placed next to the description of the beloved's eyes which, changeable and shifting in mood in contrast to the dark red of the rose, the speaker sees, but does not, or cannot, interpret. For all their privacy, their former claim of specialness, the lovers are nevertheless tied to the floodlights, the world of subterfuge and change, while the moon sails the skies they cannot reach.

They are placed, then, in a public place which enacts, as the last stanza states, the beginning of the end of things: the measure is reversed in the final stanza, so that they are tucked into their world of love; but the footwork is tricky, the unease of the second stanza which the night is

claimed to rectify is only temporarily kept in abeyance, and the resolution is itself uneasy, holding the possibility of the solidifying of fear rather than its dissolution. The fear is partly that of the self, of being tied in not only to a mutable world but to the essential selfhood which will never allow one to attain full nobility, real steadfast love. The great feeling of isolation besets the speaker right in the middle of the poem, in the most public of spaces, and, more tragically, in the private, sequestered space he has been at pains to build. The private world, the 'little room' which Donne asserted lovers make for themselves, is under threat in the very process of its making, and the main serpent in this most unEdenic garden is the poet himself.

The sense of unease which is captured by a relatively late poem such as 'In the Public Gardens' is apparent from the start of Betjeman's career. Betjeman's first collection, *Mount Zion*, is a mixture of youthful *joie de vivre*, a flexing of poetic muscles, and a prefiguring of what would turn out to be his characteristic preoccupations - church architecture and its desecration, the threat of modernity, the sadness and poetic possibility of the suburbs. Tellingly, this first collection opens with 'Death in Leamington' (p.1), a poem about an ending. The hired nurse attends a woman who, the reader knows from the first line, has died. A life of routine and the set habits of ill health are over. It is in its observation of the isolation of that life, its touching accessories and habits, what Seamus Perry calls its 'oddly compelling topographical detail', which grants the poignancy of an ordinary life coming to an end: the evening star shining through the window into an interior with its clutter of crochet, tea things, and the array of medicines which are moved aside at the end of the poem.⁸ The nurse is a carefully imagined figure, *her* sudden loneliness, emerging strongly in the third stanza, a striking complement to her commonplace response and turn of phrase: the sureness of rhyme of this stanza serves to hold the nurse in her own narrow scope of sympathy. She stands not, like Ruth, amid the alien corn, but amidst the all too familiar landscape of a claustrophobic interior,

with its paraphernalia of illness and decay, its fixed routine of five o'clock teatime, and its willed submission to a necessary assumed cheerfulness. The loneliness of the nurse in 'Death in Leamington' is something of which she is unconscious; she is a figure - not in a landscape in the traditional artistic sense, but a figure in that new suburban claustrophobic landscape which Betjeman was to become so adept at recreating and reporting from.

It is vital to the workings of this poem that both the nurse and the dead woman are anonymous; that, like the unloved women of the poem 'Business Girls' (p.181), they are both foregrounded figures and part of the anonymous mass from which they momentarily emerge, complete with the accoutrements of modern life, with its makeshift arrangements, its fleeting sympathies, including that of the nurse who, limited but not unkindly in her response, has been paid for her services and will move on to other patients in similar surroundings, to which her thoughts are turning even as she adjusts the gas before leaving. Such attention to the minutiae of things, like her breezy encouragement of her patient (already dead to her efforts), intensifies, rather than diminishes, the sympathy of the poem.

To suddenly find oneself alone, aware of mortality, is in Betjeman's poetry a common predicament, and his best poems derive from the strangeness which such a situation grants. With different degrees of self-consciousness, Betjeman's created figures offer commentaries on loss and on intense moments of realisation. In contrast with the nurse, Mrs Fairclough is a figure who is endowed with a kind of double vision: in one view she is a conventional middle-aged woman indulgently watching the younger woman; in another she is a figure of Forsterian enlightenment, alert to the sadness of age and change, caught in a setting which frees her for both viewpoints. Other figures only half register such an awareness of change. 'The Flight from Bootle' (p.38), partly absurd, partly tragic, conveys this sense against all the odds: two girls in a nightclub (sipping a drink which provides the title for Betjeman's 'Banana Blush' recording with Jim Parker)

separate in mundane circumstances but which change one of them forever - to marriage, courtship, sexual adventure?- leaving her friend out in the cold. 'The Flight from Bootle', then, becomes an escape for only one protagonist, and it is left uncertain as to the nature of this 'flight': we know only by the end of the poem that Alice, for all her adventures (and it is tempting to hear Lewis Carroll's heroine in this suburban account) will be changed irretrievably. That common experience of girls in nightclubs - a solidarity always on the edge of being interrupted by the casual arrangements of sexual adventure which might beset one and not the other - is caught here in Betjeman's clear management of the social and feminine niceties of the milieu: the Thirties slang, and the evocation of an atmosphere which provides a temporary colouring for the harsh realities being enacted, and the final address to the abandoned Lilian.

More commonly, however, it is the middle class suburb in which such change takes place. The early poem 'Exeter' (p.33) relies upon the self-contained confident loneliness of the doctor's wife of the poem's opening yielding to another feeling, and Betjeman brings to bear all the apparatus of middle class suburbia upon the mood of this opening - the setting perfectly chiming with the woman's sense of her self, her status, and her intellectual pretensions. The intent reader in the privileged space of the opening stanza is set up for a fall from the start, the very jauntness of the rhythm established as a ballad-like dance around the prose she is so self-consciously reading: the pretensions of the woman, the cradling of the stanza within titles and appellations - the wife herself, the author's name - while in the midst of everything the bells are ignored, are sealed by the emphatic syllabic marker on Huxley's name. The relentless simplicity of the verse is both emblem of the mechanistic world represented by the wife's oblivious immersion in the work of the agnostic Huxley, and at the same time a chant for simplicity, a reminder of the world she has lost. The sureness of the bells, whose summons the reader is ignoring for the modern secularism of

Huxley, returns in the poem's ending, to reiterate their call to worship after an accident of the most modern and casual kind: the clangs, clashes and whirrs of cars, bus and tram car are set beside the timeless call of the bells which, with their constant call, both in the woman's past life and her oblivious present, are unchanging in their message. In the incipient short story which underpins the poem, husband and wife spend their day apart, she intent on her intellectual life, he hurried and professional; but the poem's workings close the gap between them, so that his death, a peculiarly modern one, brought on by hurry and greed, is made to fit their joint lives. His corpse is a ghastly spectacle which literally dislodges the pretentious objects of his wife's aspirations, those fashionable periodicals which are similarly on display for the benefit of the canons' wives. In an odd jarring shift it is not to a modern hospital to which the doctor is taken but his own house, and in an ending which recalls the pastoral return of the body of the dead agricultural worker to wife and home, he is accorded a homecoming which is both timeless and overturning of modern certainties. The fate awaiting the doctor's wife in this poem - the rest of her life as a widow, and, it is hinted, a return to faith by finally hearing again the bells, and turning her attention towards them - lies beyond the edges of the poem. A sense of separation - the wife from her past, the book from the bells, the reading woman from the dying husband - is part of its quiet drama.

The poems discussed so far have depended upon quiet (and predominantly female) protagonists, privately experiencing a change or an atmosphere. If the full effect of these poems relies on anonymity, it is fame and notoriety which makes for the drama of 'The Arrest of Oscar Wilde at the Cadogan Hotel' (p.16). We are reminded that the public setting is just as often evoked by Betjeman to examine and dramatise the loneliness of a character, or to describe the fear of isolation which invades the most public spaces. Some of his greatest poems of this kind are those which evoke famous figures; when a lonely, unremittingly observant poet watches and re-

creates the inner isolation of another. His poem on Wilde's arrest uses objects - here the opulent paraphernalia of Wilde's life: the yellow book, the two coats at Willis's and the Savoy; and a recognisably Wildean turn of phrase which yields to the humorous accents of the policemen who come to arrest him. This is the crisis of the poem, the drama towards which it has been tending. Prefaced by the naiveté of dramatic arrival, highlighted typographically, by means of which the entrance of the policemen in the seventh stanza is emphatically a crude interruption from another world, the words addressed to Wilde are simultaneously what make it a poem which tips into humour, and give it a Dogberry and Verges kind of delight. The certainty of these enforcers of the law serves to arrest not only Wilde, but his sense of himself and of the shifting nuances of language. Their Cadogan hotel is different from his, but it is available for a confident assertion, a claim of knowledge which runs counter to Wilde's earlier tirade against the place in stanza five. Neatly referential to the poem's title, the officers reinforce the idea that the Cadogan hotel is what it purports to be - respectable in its finery and fame. It is the solid humorous certainty of the arresting officers that remains in the memory rather than the hectic disarray of Wilde's questions, his clinging to the force of epigram within a collapsing world: such comments are a calculated debased Wildean flippancy, too desperate to prevail against the solid matter of policemen, the harsh gaslight, the towering red of Pont Street - which Betjeman the observer of architecture cannot help but observe and fleetingly make part of the poem's tragedy. Still, Wilde is allowed to leave the poem with an exaggerated grace, which is partly tragic grandeur, partly a matter of hopeless staginess: his wild-eyed departure, as he makes his way past the hotel's opulent palms to where the hansom waits to escort him to the outside world, makes of Wilde both prisoner and monarch, his departure a matter both of his own manoeuvres (that careful but disdainful brushing past the palms), and of observing the last courtesies towards a great departing figure, who is helped

into a hansom, the last lines capturing the mixture of deliberation and coercion with which he must leave the hotel and the century.

Critical opinion is divided about this poem. John Sparrow disliked it for its 'attempt to create an atmosphere of "period" by wheeling the old stage properties - the astrakhan coat, the hock and seltzer, *The Yellow Book* - all too conscientiously into place', and it was rejected by Grigson as too 'smart and frivolous' to be included in his *New Verse*, finding its niche instead in the 1933 *Oxford and Cambridge* magazine - fittingly, one might think, for a poem which has been described by even one of its admirers, Derek Stanford, as being 'in the best undergraduate tradition', and by Northrop Frye as an example of one 'of the vast corpus of naive verse which sporadically gets into provincial newspapers'.⁹

Yet there is another response tugging at the edges of reaction to the poem. A.N. Wilson calls it 'one of Betjeman's finest poems of his early maturity', while Greg Morse sees in its focus on details and its presentation of Wilde's fall an interesting parallel with 'Death in Leamington'.¹⁰ In that early second volume it seems to demand attention, asserts itself as pivotal. It prompts all the descriptors of slightness - 'light verse', 'provincial', 'undergraduate tradition', but carries an insistent force of unforgettable resonance. Far enough away from Wilde's fall to view it sympathetically, yet near enough for it to be held in a communal memory of hushed disgrace, the 1930s poem looks back at the tragic and vital Victorian figure from the perspective of an age separated from him by a world war which has partly muted that particular tragedy, made it seem both precious and heightened. For such an atmosphere those objects dismissed by Sparrow are more than stage properties; they are intrinsic to the poem's willed management of stasis and movement, the personal tragedy acted out within a historical moment which is already relentlessly moving onwards. For what makes the poem so effective in its poignancy is Wilde's questions remaining

unanswered, his speech meeting a blank wall of non-understanding and response, his wit floundering without a fit audience.

The other poem in *Continual Dew* which describes a known figure is one of Betjeman's most acclaimed early works: in 'Death of King George V' (p.35) one can feel the intent concentration upon the royal figure's realisation of his task, or his half-realisation of it: for the young king of the poem shares with the doctor's wife in 'Exeter' and with the nurse in 'Death in Leamington' an only dimly sensed foreboding, and like them this is reinforced by his surroundings. If objects and their memory hold an important place in the poem on Wilde's demise, they similarly prevail in this poem which details the death of an historical, rather than literary, monarch. Objects denote the old king's preoccupations - the shoot, the famous stamp collection; and the poem's point of view moves from these objects to the gaze of the now-dead king, a stickler for formalities, wandering critically over clothing and landscape. We are made aware of a personality for whom the sky meant dead birds, the fields possibilities for the hunt. The poem's unique achievement is to make of this narrowness a specific poignancy of atmosphere, similar to that of the unimaginative nurse in 'Death in Leamington': sadness gathers around an unremarkable figure (one, here, whose eyes are emphatically closed). Then, with a keen visual shift, the poem visits the world of the dead king: the old men who are his fellows are only partly cronies ; they are also, in a vital mix of the poem's sympathies, the upholders of an order which is passing away, and, though redundant, maintain a stoic clinging to some virtues which it is perilous to lose: they held onto certain notions of honourable behaviour, they wrote to one another regularly. Far away from their quiet houses something new is happening: the air they have breathed in fields and quietly grand houses is disturbed by an air which, as the epigraph implies, carries a new quality, as well as a new King. If the epigraph, based on a headline in the *Daily Express*¹¹ carries the verve and excitement of 'news', the air which concludes the poem, unlike

that which finishes the epigraph, is a more complex element, placing the young king in a strangely troubled relation to the world of the father which he must inherit. The hatless young king, watched by the static stare of that world of old men, is both carefree and vulnerable, his suburbs stretching beyond the runway as the third line of the last stanza stretches to its own utmost reach, into a world of unsettled newness and an uncertain future.

Compared to the succinctness of the stanza's opening certainties, the world of the old men with their old fashioned sense of what is proper yields to a world of doubt, a long vista of uncertainty for the young king to both claim and contend with. 'Death of King George V' makes of Betjeman a laureate before his time, realises his potential for the difficult task of writing about royalty. Ironically the poems he wrote during his official laureateship can never match this. It catches the frail isolation of royalty without being hampered by awe, a quality searched for, but crucially lacking, in the later 'A Ballad of the Investiture 1969' (p.332) which, hemmed in by royal command and bound by its occasion, misses its mark at every point, and remains a poem searching for an atmosphere. By contrast, in that early poem, without embarrassment in the presence of the great, and without reverence, there is nothing lonelier or more human than that hatless young man.

The landscapes and the figures are involved, then, in a combined and delicate effort in the poems' workings. Betjeman's figures of loneliness are vital to his poetry, but so are this use of objects, and so are their settings. Seascapes, suburbs, drab upstairs bedrooms, railway stations, bus stops, are not merely background but become instinct with the feeling conveyed.

There is a moment in many of Betjeman's poems when the setting seems to have the authority of feeling, a collusion with the human understanding of loneliness. Mrs Fairclough is endowed with what I have called a Forsterian sense that her surroundings inform her understanding, are complicit with it. The nurse in 'Death in Leamington' understands nothing, but has a brief

transitory tenderness completely in keeping with her own limited capacity for feeling. This is finely managed, and Betjeman has an instinct for what is required between figure and surroundings for each poem's overall effect. Youth and age as depicted by Mrs Fairclough's watching of Clemency the general's daughter gains its power partly from this sense of surroundings, partly the mood of detached, if compassionate reverie with which the older woman contemplates the younger. In the poem 'Croydon' (p.11) it works differently, in the form of a walk taken by an older and a younger figure: in this early poem, the speaker has a vaguely placed addressee, receiving memories from the older, knowledgeable companion about a dead uncle. It is a poem in which exactitude vies with vagueness, with the conscious reaching for something finally lost. The processes of the poem are employed in an attempt to wrest detail in the face of this loss, this slipping away of the life of the man described. It opens with both authority and imprecision: the decisiveness of birth has to sit beside a house which can only be similar to the one in which it took place: the poem, as J.R. Watson has observed, has all the properties of a suburban elegy.¹² The confident speaker is, for the first two stanzas, the most able and authoritative of guides, knowing the topography of the past, informative about local words, sure of his domain as he conducts his young companion breezily through the old landscape, pointing out beauties like a tour guide. But the confiding tone is not constant, and for the elegiac note to prevail in the poem the voice of the older speaker has to lose its certainty of tone, its authority of knowledge and history (what Watson calls his 'heartiness')¹³ and become, for the last two stanzas, a voice alone with its knowledge of death, a direction triggered by the short last line of the second stanza, and continued, as it were, alone, without the benefit of the listening pupil. Such a conclusion is far from the opening tone of almost breezy family anecdote, with a bit of natural history thrown in, spoken by one eager to convey to a younger generation the boyhood of a dead uncle. What Watson reads as a failing of the poem - the

slightly irrelevant (as he sees it) use of the local word for sparrows¹⁴, and the out-of-place poeticism of the first stanza- can instead be read as the constructed process by which a change must come upon the speaker, the deliberate rendering of a voice confident in an authority it is just about to lose: topography and old quaint words are more easily conveyed to another generation than the sense of loss which is really what is deeply hidden in this poem.

The younger figure in this early poem, quiescent at the edges of the poem, necessary for the older speaker's changing tone and recollection of a lost past, is more vividly rendered in the later poem 'Norfolk' (p.168); becomes, in fact, the poet himself, who visits in memory a walk with his own father, and recreates a time when companionship was secure, and intimates the corroding effect of the long interval of estrangement, the gap between the particular scene and the poem's recreation of it one of pain and guilt: the abrupt opening line, unashamedly about corruption and loss of innocence, puts us on our guard for devilry within the apparently quiet and untumultuous topography of the Norfolk landscape. The easy impatience of the young boy, an impatience expressed through his own quickness of movement in contrast to the father's more ponderous tread, is used to mark the poet's intent recreation of the inner movement from love and security to estrangement and guilt. The poem drags its length, its now agile form and movement, along the memory of that earlier rhythm of the childhood walk where the two walkers - the chaotic and restless movement of the child, the measured tread of the father - existed peacefully within their differentness. The boy's slight impatience with his father's pace of walk is expressed, in the second stanza, in the form of mere boyish movement, a teasing grace. Reaching the boat which was their destination, father and son would settle for the night, there would be supper and the light of lanterns and a warm cabin. Security is claimed by the remembering poet, but security is often a false feeling for Betjeman, as much so in a boat at night as at a children's

party, and these moorings, of lapping river and the sounds of Norfolk itself, are as deceptive for him as they were for the child David Copperfield: the neatness of the poem's form, the repetition of its opening line for the beginning of the final stanza, marks a control of movement and a skill which the young boy lacked in his erratic and unconscious energy and affection, skittering about his father. But skill and composure and the management of poetry itself has come at a great price, as the last stanza acknowledges: the poet now knows something of the history of the church they visited when he was a child, but the knowledge of architecture, like all human knowledge, is redundant. What is the use of knowing that Fowler of Louth restored the church, when between father and son there can be no restoration? Better the strange, ineffable murmurings of the river, the poem implies, than the corruption of secure human knowledge, which has its part to play in the tragedy between father and son.

It is a tragedy which is played out more fully in Betjeman's long autobiographical poem *Summoned by Bells*. In all Betjeman's poems of estrangement, the tragedy is played out again and again in a myriad of settings which move towards a topography of feeling, the accretions of memory and layered associations which can be visited, re-visited, and made to settle around a noticing, feeling figure. This is given larger scope in the longer poem, and is allowed also a great comic mode. Betjeman is a poet confidingly and humorously open about the process of poetic endeavour and development. It is what makes for the humour and engaging voice of the opening of *Summoned by Bells*, and its oft-quoted statement of intent about being a poet (p.13-14). Such a statement holds both a heartfelt naïveté and a knowing stance towards his own affectation: ruefully aware of his belatedness as a Romantic, the older Betjeman both laughs at his younger self, traversing Keats's landscape with his notebook and pencil, and *makes* his own poetic self through landscape. Hampstead Heath must now receive another poet, gauche and untenable though he might be. In his recognition

of his own stance Betjeman is as self-conscious and self-parodying as Prufrock, whose author has a walk-on part in this poem of poetic awakening. Other figures crowd in and contend with the emerging poet's voice. The second section on Betjeman's father and the family firm is as powerful as anything in Gosse's *Father and Son*. In the account of his father's workplace there is both detail and boredom, honestly rendered. Movingly, the art of the works of the factory and the art of poetry are set together in a vital tension. They partly share the same qualities - precision, intense patience, long devoted hours of labour. Time and again in this section the vocabulary flows from one art to the other, each with its absorbed movements and requirements of imagination and industry. The tragedy is felt all the more strongly on account of this overlap of words and skill, as though one art is creating another even as it resists it.

It is a poem about escape (from parental expectation, from the Victorian past), but Betjeman, like Alice in 'The Flight from Bootle', knows that this comes at a cost. The longer poem re-iterates and expands upon the shorter intense lyrics, has recourse to comedy, but relies none-the-less on some of the same devices. The figure of the poet at its centre draws upon others, is held in tension with them, and achieves at last an uneasy triumph - rattling along to some sort of temporary vindication in that vehicle, the motor car (always a barbed object for Betjeman) with which the poem opened. The child whose reverie is interrupted, at the opening of the poem, by the car making its way up West Hill, becomes the young man who manages to evade detection of fraud partly by means of the devastation wreaked by a colleague's Morris. The hilarity of the ending is deflected by the return to lyric, enforcing a distance upon the antics of youth and the young Betjeman's outwitting of a rival. The place, Cat Hill, so undistinguished and unloved, becomes, as is so typical of Betjeman, transfigured by that distance, and returns the poet to as lonely a place as the

child of the poem's opening, or the older figure of 'Norfolk': older, colder, and careworn (p.100).

Like the self-conscious lover of 'In the Public Gardens', Betjeman's self-portrayal in *Summoned by Bells* is one aware of both the absurdities and possibilities of a poetic rendering of being the self he cannot help being, and which the poem sets out to chart. That self takes many forms and assumes many roles throughout both the autobiographical work and the lyric poems. The speaker is in turn hopeless imposter, abject would-be lover, lost child and guilty son. But occasionally he evades all such roles, and gives a different account. Perhaps Betjeman's most triumphant account of loneliness is to be found in one of his lesser known poems, a sonnet on a work by the painter Julius Olsson, where the sonnet form imposes a concentration on the subject which holds all such roles at bay, and so looks at the artist in a different mode to that allowed by the capacious extent of *Summoned by Bells*. In the sonnet, bridge players in a hotel play their hands overlooked by Olsson's painting, and once again the speaker speculates on the effect of distance, on how much time must have passed, how many games of bridge been played, since the painting of the work and the present. In this case, though, that distance is not contemplated with guilt or anguish, but is allowed a quiet reverie. Betjeman's lifelong feeling for, and involvement with, the art of painting is an important factor in his adept disposition of the figures in his poems, and their coalescence with their surroundings. In this poem the careless tedium of the bridge parties is contrasted to the intense, self-contained satisfaction of the artist. The day he spent on the painting is evoked as one of deep absorption. It is a poem about artistic satisfaction, the endurance of deep feeling and the need for its expression, and how these interplay with fashion and critical opinions and indifference. Olsson remains removed from his once fashionable reputation, his falling out of favour, his slow emergence into view again. What the poem refuses is any sense of pathos, anything other than a fine removal of

the artist from the chatter and opinion-making of critical pronouncement on his work. Like Lily Briscoe, Olsson has had his vision, - a day of spring warmth which turns to slight coldness towards evening, a day of private engrossment in his own gift until, alert to that slight change of weather, he strolls happily back to the fishermen on the quay (a company, we can assume, very different from the bridge party within whose vision the painting is framed). He is still strolling in the sonnet's ending, as though he were a figure in a painting himself, after another change of weather, as a result of which he is again in fashion. The end of the sonnet sees him making his way back towards the detailed finality of his painting, and the special elements, of concentrated enjoyment, which were part of its composition. In the isolation of the artist detached from his critics and his public (who are necessarily, depicted as they are as bridge-players, part of a close-knit group), the painter is recalled, summoned by strong feeling - the specialness of his own feeling for his gift - back to the locale of its making. It is the same powerful feeling which recalls Captain Webb to the Saturday evening congregation (p.42), and which recalls Betjeman himself to the powerful summons of the past in *Summoned by Bells*. Considering his poetry as a vast gallery of carefully created lonely and reporting figures, one hesitates to agree with John Press that the autobiographical poem 'stands apart from the rest of his work'.¹⁵ Rather, it acts as a necessary counterpoint to the assembled depictions of the poet in the shorter poems, in which the figure of the poet is brought to life in each new situation and setting: terrified or wary, love-sick or guilty, or, just occasionally, able to view himself, after a change in fashionable taste, strolling back along his loved beach like the artist Julius Olsson, with all the insouciance of creative privacy, released from anxiety, whether about his gift, his reputation, or the conduct of his life.

Footnotes

1. For John Betjeman's association with Edward James, and James' influence on Betjeman's attitude towards book production and aesthetics, both in his own early works and in *The Architectural Review*, see Karin Hiscock, 'Modernity and 'English' Tradition: Betjeman at *The Architectural Review*', *Journal of Design History* vol. xiii, no. 3 (2000) p. 199.
2. See Philip Irving Mitchell, "'Love is greater than taste": The Moral Architecture of John Betjeman and John Piper', *Christianity and Literature* vol. lxiii, no. 2 (Winter 2014) pp. 257-84.
3. Biographies include Patrick Taylor-Martin, *John Betjeman: His Life and Work* (London 1983); the three volume work by Bevis Hillier, *Young Betjeman* (London 1998), *John Betjeman: New Fame, New Love* (London 2002), and *The Bonus of Laughter* (London 2004); and A.N.Wilson, *Betjeman* (London 2006). The recent radio plays by Jonathan Smith (*Mr Betjeman's Class*, broadcast on Radio 4, 25.xii.2017 at 14.15) and *Mr Betjeman Regrets*, broadcast on Radio 4, 26.xii.2017 at 14.15) also concentrate on a more troubled Betjeman, in youth and age respectively.
4. All references to poems are taken from John Betjeman, *Collected Poems* (London 1958, repr. 1995) . References to *Summoned by Bells* are taken from John Betjeman, *Summoned by Bells*, with a Foreword by Griff Rhys Jones (London 1960, repr. 2007).
5. *John Betjeman: Letters*, ed. Candida Lycett Green, vol. i (London 1994) p. 6.
6. Derek Stanford, *John Betjeman: A Study* (London 1961) p. 83.
7. Tim Hancock, 'Licensed for Embrace: Insouciance and Exigency in John Betjeman's Love Poems', *The Cambridge Quarterly* vol. xli, no. 4 (Dec. 2013) pp. 343-4.

8. Seamus Perry, 'Betjeman's Tennyson', in Robert Douglas-Fairhurst and Seamus Perry (eds.), *Tennyson Among the Poets: Bicentenary Essays* (Oxford 2009) pp. 409-26: 426.
9. John Sparrow in the preface to John Betjeman, *Selected Poems* (London 1948) p. ix, quoted in Bevis Hillier, *John Betjeman: New Fame, New Love* (London 2002) p. 399; Grigson in Hillier, *Young Betjeman*, p.358; Stanford, *John Betjeman*, p. 87-88; Northrop Frye, 'The Betjeman Brand', review of W.H.Auden, *Slick but Not Streamlined*, in *Poetry* vol. lxxi, no.3 (Dec. 1947) pp. 162-5: 163.
10. Wilson, *Betjeman*, p. 47; Greg Morse, *John Betjeman: Reading the Victorians* (Brighton 2008) p. 24.
11. John Press, *John Betjeman, Writers and their Work* (London 1974) p. 31.
12. J. R. Watson, ' 'Croydon' by John Betjeman', *Critical Survey* vol. iii, no.3 (Winter 1967) pp. 175-7: 177.
13. Watson, p.176.
14. Watson, p.176.
15. Press, *John Betjeman*, p. 44.